

Hokusai in the Antipodes

Thirty-Six Love Letters to a Mountain

1.

You can't see me, but I can see you. I'm across the water at my window. I see your headland – the jut of your chin as it touches the sea. Your head is wearing a cloud and your shoulder rain. I'm watching your weather as though through gauze net, but all your old-time geologies and geographies are still plain to see. It's what you are – shape - and you got this way just by being in one place, as well as by being that place. By being subject to the elements and time. In fact ,all of time has made you - from that moment of bang and sulphurous smell, from the collision of matter and dust and the itch of electrics to now - to this minute. Even the fine rain that falls on you today is dissolving something from your surfaces and swimming it to the sea. You will be incrementally different tomorrow – not to my inexact eye but to the god of detail for sure.

2.

We are in love. But perhaps you don't know it yet. Though your loveliness is enough for me. For now.

3.

I have been asked how old you are by a child. As old as the earth minus a day or two, I think. You were there when the continents were whole – like unbroken dinner plates. You knocked sleepy heads with what became Tasmania, before we cut it free. There was thunder under the earth and you and your two sisters sat up in bed to look at the stars. You look at them still.

You were once stars and so were we. I believe we are distantly related. Cousins removed a thousand times.

4.

I have sailed half-way across the bay to look at you up-close. But I think I love you best from afar. You are my Mt Fuji. Hokusai and I will look at you from every angle. He will see you thirty-six times in order to print his views. I on the other hand will look at you for the rest of my life and be pleased by what I see. In every adjustment of light, I will think you lovelier.

5.

Hokusai understood that Fuji had god inside his aboriginal self. The shape of the volcano was simply his skirts. No one dared look under them. Instead the painter saw the mountain everywhere and in everything. He made it the world, against which the shadows of life were cast. Instead of Fuji, he used the character for *peerless* to title his prints. What shall I call you? Ude Youang or Wurdi Youang? What do the birds call you? They might know you as a stone god. Flying west they might dip their wings as the first star rolls up your shoulder.

6.

With a camera and a trick of light I will take a selfie and appear to hold you in the palm of my hand. I could open my mouth and look to be on the point of swallowing you or stand just so and wear you like a crown.

7.

I have come across the water by ferry today with a walking party. Although from my window you seem only an arm's length away, it takes an hour on the water and a thirty-minute bus ride to be by your side. We are wearing sensible shoes and sun hats. Someone in charge has the Ordinance Survey - a map that is all concentric circles, with your elevations described in

an italic script. All your spurs and spikes have been drawn as though seen from above - perhaps by a bird.

One man has a GPS and a metal detector too. I have a field guide to birds, binoculars, sandwiches, paper and pen. We are each of us prepared in our own way. I can eat cheese and pickles held together by two hunks of bread, I can guess at bird names, sketch clouds and write notes. Is the gadget man searching the sky for satellites and space junk or the ground for gold? Surely, he is more likely to turn up bottle caps and coins.

When we arrive at your foot he logs our position on his device. I knot a stem of button grass – like a paper prayer at a Shinto shrine threaded onto straw. He is Hansel. I am Gretel. We are both in the business of laying crumbs. There are a hundred paths to choose from – a criss-cross of trails like scratches on a pane of glass. Up is the simplest direction to take with detours to lookouts and *beauty spots*. Each path is a songline, an ant track – a trail made by a child dragging a broken branch. We follow a charted track - sand underfoot, rocks all around and we walk through Hokusai's palette: bone, dun, soot, goose-wing grey, plum, gravel, ice blue, charcoal, smoke – everything here is tinged, finely tinted as though stained with water and ink. We begin the climb - aiming to reach your knee by lunchtime.

8.

Granite tors exaggerate the skyline. It seems the universe has contracted to be this but only for today. At Big Rock we can walk to the edge of the world and back again. What is over the edge is anyone's guess – uncharted territory, cloud, pebbles atop rocks balanced beautifully on boulders? No one can go quite close enough to the edge to tell.

Between the boulders a tree grows, the roots fed by sand, salt air and dew. It's enough for a bonsai kept clipped by wind and the weight of the sky to survive. It's an exercise in frugality – this existing on nothing but dust and damp air.

9.

A bird rests in its twiggy, bouncing branches unaware of the poem she sits in.

10.

Some of your stones are formed into cairns by walkers or just tumbled together by time – it is hard to tell. Some with a flatter face have been scooped and dished in spots to collect rainwater. Your first people knew your caves and cold stores. The Yawangi knew the lie of the land, where lightning struck, where ants took wing before rain. They had names for these things. They carved rain spoons into your sides - shallow wells reflecting the sky. When I photograph them on my phone, the water reads like treacle – my sandaled feet line up at the edge of the pool and there is a faint reflection of my craning, querying pose.

11.

The man with the metal detector is up ahead moving like a janitor with a floor-buffing machine. I want him to get a fix on a silver button older than Baudin, but wedged so tightly between two rocks so as to be impossible to reach.

12.

Middle distance and below the stunted forest looks unkempt. Conversely, the faraway flax-coloured fields are too clean – it's what distance does – this tidying-up. Colour collides with colour and the lie of the land divides itself into a mosaic, each farm nudging the next like the

overlapping of feathers on the breast of a bird. Sand slips through a crack in a rock a hairbreadth wide and the small god in you nods and notes it.

13.

You've had an eon or two to look at your likeness in the sea. It is your biography – mirrors held up to you at various angles to catch the jut of your chin and the line of trees at your elbow. Ships pass before you chugging their cargos across your wobbly, mirrored self. Cars, computer parts, flat packs of Ikea bookshelves slide by and you barely blink. You have seen almost everything before. Only storms or sand-scouring winds worry at your sculptures. And on a still day you can reassemble your image easily on the smooth surface of the sea.

14.

This morning you sleep late. Do not dress for me or rise from your bed. Stay where you are Wurdi Youang! I'm sending this message by bird.

15.

Perhaps the painter Fred Williams was your Hokusai. He brought his easel and box of oils along in his knapsack. He took the long view but from close-up. He had your measure. He saw the horizon from your summit and altered it. He figured your bumps and bellies into a floating flatland. Having never learned to drive, he was the ever-observant passenger. Trails of colour slid by his eye as they flashed through open country. He held the rain splashed ochre and yellow-white hay inside his head until he could sit and sketch. Did he ever draw in the car I wonder? His wife steering through ditches, rain fogging the windows, bumps and jolts recorded by his free-wheeling pencil.

Like Flinders, Fred first saw you from the sea. Returning from England's orchard palette to the clay-hard climate and endless acres of sky he might have raced back to his ship's cabin for binoculars. From the top deck he might have watched the granite slopes come into focus and then as the ship ploughed through the heads, the perfect geometry fade from view. He would have known then that he wanted to paint this. He would have had the colour in his head, the music of them on his mind, his sightline that of the child's, the ant's, of lovers lain down cheek to the ground.

The eye moves over his paintings restlessly, moving from jewel to jewel. Walking from Big Rock lookout back to the bus I see a fox scat full of iridescent beetle backs – I pick it apart with a stick. It's a stinky mosaic, a miniature, an icon painting full of metallic golds and greens. The fox has an eye for detail, for pattern – for the scribulative music of moving things. The fox sees everything but edits the universe down to some signal detail. This is how Fred worked too.

16.

It's certain that dolphins cross between us. They follow the ferry on its hourly crossing - like six or seven St Christophers leaping up and falling down.

17.

Your minerals speak to mine - if I could only understand them. I need a geologist – someone who knows a gem inside-out, uncut or clean.

18.

Perhaps the mountains only seem tall and the oceans wide because we are small - perhaps they seem old because our time here is barely a blip. Scale is everything. Tennyson called the seas homeless but you tether the ocean to the shore on your side – weight it down like a rock on a picnic rug - on my side the lighthouse does the job. The waters run between our two homelands.

19.

Whereabouts I stand to see you is paramount. Kneeling alters the focal length. Reclining adjusts the depth of field. Excursions to the seashore, field glasses, light diffused through smoke, one's notion of grandeur – these things amplify or diminish you. Distance is a hypnotic. It's a trick and I willingly succumb. Close-up is a different universe.

20.

Hokusai did not climb Fuji to make his pictures, instead he pretended to be drawing fishing boats, picnickers, shellfish collectors, pilgrims, messengers on horseback, kites, a temple roof, the dancing of cranes. Sometimes the mountain loomed, sometimes it fit on the head of a pin, sometimes it photo bombed what appeared to be a simple drawing of everyday life. Hokusai worked with obsession and distraction recording them both. *There is no metric – no mathematics to explain your presence or my lunatic obsession with you*, he told the mountain. It was keeping him up at nights and when he did sleep he dreamt only of Fuji. Standing at the window in my nightgown I nod. “Hokusai, I have that dream too”.

21.

Today I have decided that from afar you resemble anthills.

22.

But in a Chinese scroll painting dated 1123 I saw you depicted as three sore thumbs held up against a ruffle of clouds.

23.

Once upon a time you invented clouds. At first they assembled like thoughts above the eyebrows of the sky. Little absences - transparent and pearly, when the sun rose or set they turned the colour of *ikura*, (red caviar).

24.

Later you collected the clouds and assembled them into a *Museum of the Air*. Waking at dawn I would catch you wearing them, like the powdered wigs of a Georgian gentleman.

25.

There are songs suspended in the air around you – an agitation of warm air – mineral particles rubbing together – a thin, thready cicada music. It is the tinnitus of atmospheric pressure - music a meteorologist might like.

26.

The needles in the barometer twitch and jump. The ocean is scratched glass. Days like this there seem to be more distance between us. Days like this the ferry tests the mooring cables. My feet swell in my shoes. My hair defies the comb. A storm is coming I know it and you know it and you've turned your back. You've hunkered down pulling the clouds around you.

27.

At night your unfolded concertina contracts. Your three faces become one – and then none. Only the fox and owl with their night vision goggles can still see you.

28.

Like Hokusai, Ruskin had the bug. Mountains fevered him, powered him, possessed him. Unlike Hokusai he studied them with his feet. A box of watercolours in his pocket, a blue necktie knotted at his throat, he puffed his way up dizzying inclines to get a closer look. He lost his footing and skinned his knees on stones as sharp as broken cups and saucers. It seemed necessary to his seeing, his understanding of line and light, this pitting himself against the murderous summit. Climbing was not just a madness, it was also an imperative – the method actor's preparation. Sitting astride a rock he'd make a drawing, then another and another, lightening fast - making five minute "memoranda" that have survived a century and counting.

29.

A half-century after Ruskin scraped his knees in the Alps, Lafcadio Hearn began the ascent of Fuji. On a summer's night in 1898 he left his bed in a pilgrim inn, was bundled into a *jinrickisha* and wheeled to the foot of the sleeping god. The night was balmy. Cicadas were singing. Hearn had risen from sleep smiling, the nape of his neck moist, his face rosy. He dressed as for a country drive and was slightly bemused to see that his guides were carrying bundles of winter clothing thick enough for a North Pole trek. They were poker faced, only too aware of the risks. It was a tricky undertaking. The *jinrickisha* could only reach so far up the mountain – after that they would tie ropes to this frail looking foreigner, and to themselves. They would walk ahead pulling him along. But legs were broken and toes

frostbitten on some ascents. There could be unlucky falls. They warned that although Fuji's feet stood in *Doyo* the period of greatest summer heat, his snow-hatted head lived in *Daikan* – the season of deepest cold. Fuji existed in two seasons, in two climates as only an immortal can. Hearn was chastened but continued to smile.

At an elevation of 6,000 feet, he wrote in his diary, *hire a horse*.

30.

Wurdi Youang, you are the story of now. Your vital statistics - your girth, your exquisitely precise position under the stars, your rate of erosion – all of it studied, the data collected and logged – but your story unfolds like a Chinese screen and suddenly I see we are also looking at then.

31.

Today you practice being a silhouette. Light and the passage of the sun prepare you. It is about appearing to be floating on a single surface whilst also having substance. I'm easily fooled – easily amused by all your moves. Tomorrow you will be an ink painting – everything about you said in a single smoky line.

32.

Mountains are our first monuments. Nothing is more substantial, nothing more worthy of our attention – except perhaps **the teardrop on the cheek of time*, the Taj Mahal. But for all their substance, their brutish imposition, a reflection of themselves in trembling water eclipses everything. Fuji has double the lustre seen on the surface of Lake Kawaguchiko. The Taj is on tiptoe to see herself in the great marble reflecting pool. Wurdi Youang is young again when he looks at himself in the sea.

33.

If stones find other stones perhaps you will one day receive the Chinese pictograms
for *mouth* and *moon* I scratched onto a stone and threw into the Huangpu River.

34.

Both Ruskin and Hearn were visionaries, yet both had problems with their sight. Ruskin suffered motes and floaters. At seventeen Hearn had already lost the sight in his left eye. Both men used a spyglass for distance and a hand lens for detail and it gave a decided cast to what they saw.

They were eyewitnesses - boots on the ground, heads in the clouds, throats raspy from the cold – foreign correspondents. Interpreters of a new aesthetic, they wrote highly charged reports from the front – at once illuminating and myopic. Ruskin's floaters plagued his pictures, he felt the peaks were obscured, their outlines partly erased or interrupted. His prose, however, was heady. In print he was the prophet, the advocate. There was no hint of the coloured glasses he'd had made to shield his eyes.

35.

Tonight the wind sounds like someone tuning a violin or a bow drawn across the back of a saw. Even from this distance I feel I can hear stones fall from your sides. You seem to be in the process of disassembling yourself, like a building suffering the wrecking ball one floor at a time.

36.

I must move from the window Wurdī Youang and get back to writing. But turning away I
look over my shoulder and see you looking over your shoulder at me.

*Note: “Only let this one teardrop, this Tajmahal, glisten spotlessly bright on the cheek of time...”

Rabindranath Tagore translated by Kshitish Roy from *One Hundred and One Poems*